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MEN VS WOMEN IN BATTLE FOR FORESTS

by Gopa Goshi

INDIA, IDRC/CSE -- In the remote Himalayan village of Dungari-Paitoali, the men are extremely displeased with their women. They wanted to sell off the nearby forest to the state government so that it could be converted into a potato farm. But they have been thwarted in their plans by their own women. If the forest had been cut, the women would have had to spend several more hours walking at least another 5 km every day to fetch their daily fuel and fodder.

The men do not collect these daily necessities. They are annoyed that the women's protests have denied the village the sought-after benefits of progress -- a motorable road, a bus connection, a high school, and a health centre -- which they believe the farm would have brought. For the women, however, the forest was more important.

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The village of Dungari-Paitoali is situated at a height of 6500 feet in the catchment area of the Pindar River, in Chamoli district. It is one of the biggest villages of the region, but is not touched by a main road. The nearest bus station is 9 km away, and from there it is a steep climb to the village. The hill slopes on the way are totally denuded of trees.

In 1978, the state government's horticulture department negotiated with the Panchayat (village council) for the acquisition of 10 hectares of land to set up a potato seed farm. The villagers were led to believe that the men would get work on the farm, and that many other benefits would follow.

However, the contractor in charge of the project encircled the entire 50 hectares of the village forest with a boundary wall. He also brought in 80 percent of his labour from Nepal, thus denying jobs to the local men.

The women were going to become the worst sufferers of this development, however. The boundary wall left no entrance for their cattle and no alternative place to collect fuel and fodder. Naturally they objected to this forest grabbing.

The contractor reportedly was abusive and threatened them with dire consequences. Dungari-Paitoali is so remote that these women were unaware of the famous Chipko Movement (the movement to hug trees to prevent deforestation) in the same district. Nor did they know that oak trees are a protected species and cannot be felled without the permission of the forest department. Theirs was mainly an oak forest.

Enraged, but also terrified, the women sought outside help. A Chipko activist heard of the women's protests, and visited the village. A women's organization was set up. Realising the sensitivity of the situation, the district administrators also visited the village and set up an enquiry committee consisting of the village people, Chipko activists, and local officials. The committee concluded that the forest land already cleared for the farm, plus two more hectares, may be given to the horticulture department, but that the remaining forest area, containing 90 percent of the oak trees, should not be cut. Thus the women succeeded in saving a major portion of their forest.

However, influential male villagers, including the village head, did not like the women's success. They thought that this had hampered important development opportunities. They wrote letters to the Chipko activists warning them not to enter the village in the future. Then they turned the question of deforestation into a men vs women issue, and warned the villagers against accepting the leadership of women.

They tried to isolate the women's leaders from the rest of the villagers by spreading rumours. For example it was said that the village had been blacklisted because of the women's movement. As a result, its youth would not be recruited to the army, nor would the village be supplied with essentials like salt and kerosene. These rumours frightened many villagers. Some men began to blame their wives and mothers for bringing these problems to the village.

The Dungari-Paitoali women have raised some pertinent issues. They are saying, in effect, that since it is they who are directly affected by deforestation, they should have the primary right to manage their forests. It is women, too, who have been the main activists in the Chipko Movement.

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Even before the Dungari-Paitoali incident, women from many villages resorted to action in protecting forests.

In March 1974, 27 women of Reni village successfully protected the local forest from the axes of 60 men employed by a local contractor. Later, an investigating committee set up by the government pointed out that it was wrong to cut the forest, even from a purely scientific point of view. This incident made the Chipko Movement widely known to the outside world.

In 1978, about 30 women of Bhyunder village, which is situated just before the Valley of Flowers, protected their forest from the axes of their own relatives from a neighbouring village. The men were going to cut the trees to meet the fuel needs of the 250,000-odd pilgrims visiting the famous Badrinath Temple. As the men of Bhyunder village had refused to cut the trees, the forest department had given the contract to men of a neighbouring village. But the stiff resistance of the women again saved the forest.

The material existence of the Himalayan villages is linked with the forests. Because of the lack of jobs, the men often move to the plains in search of work, and the women are left behind to cultivate the land and tend the cattle, apart from doing the housework. The problem of collecting fuel and fodder has worsened with the indiscriminate destruction of the forests. In some areas, women have to walk as much as 20 km to meet their daily needs. No wonder, then, that they are struggling to protect the forests that remain.

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